

# Placecast Episode Eleven with Kersten England - Transcript

## **Nicola Headlam:**

Welcome to Placecast, a Local Policy Innovation Partnership Hub production based at the University of Birmingham. Placecast is essential listening for those keen to explore the ins and outs of knowledge mobilisation for influence in central and local government, based on the view that it is only through animating the power of place-based leadership. The wicked problems of 2025 can become more manageable.

I'm speaking this morning with a real place-based leadership aficionado, Kersten England. Kersten has a more than 30-year career, had a lot of chief executive roles within local government. Is the chair of the Young Foundation and for our purposes, she's also co-investigator on the Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership, based out of the University of Leeds. Good morning.

## **Kersten England:**

Morning, Nic. Nice to be with you.

## **Nicola Headlam:**

Thank you very much. And obviously, we've known each other for a long time through various networks and things. I can't remember when we first met, but we've known each other for a long time. And you're most associated, I suppose, with doing the business in local government is that. Can you tell me how that that started and how that career began?

## **Kersten England:**

Yeah. Oh, absolutely. Well, interestingly, my career began in higher education when I was doing my doctoral studies at Manchester University, and I also ended up... well I was teaching the history department at the university and a top four extramural rural department. So, kind of, but I guess I was a historical anthropologist. I was working on the impact of colonialism in Southern Africa.

So I think I was wired from the beginning to have an intention for research to be purposed, to have impact in place, because I'd been a community activist and anti-apartheid community activist before I went to university, Zimbabwe was become independent. That's what I studied. I then went to live, research and work in Zimbabwe for a while with collective cooperatives. And I suppose that's where my sort of kind of first desire to see academic research have real world impact came from.

Yeah, but then you have aged me, but it's absolutely I'm not ashamed to say that was early 1980s when there were no permanent academic posts. I had a split decision whether I went south to be a research assistant for my professor, moved to Oxford, or I applied for a job in local government, and I ended up going into local government as, a gender equality and organisation development officer.

There you go. Not in the most central part of local authorities, you might think. But I quickly got a passion for the difference that local government could make on a daily basis. And that's never waned because I think that, you know, we are the sector has held places together through very difficult times in the last 15 years, really, I would say in all kinds of ways that are not generally recognised or celebrated, even as the money has been reduced.

So, yes. So I progressed in my career through, kind of being involved with strategy and policy, and then I did some big service delivery. I did then work for government for a couple of years, and ultimately I became first the chief executive in York and then latterly in Bradford, which is my sort of alma mater equivalent, if you like.

**Nicola Headlam:**

That's that's where my heart was in the brilliant district of Bradford, which is, phenomenal place. Yes, absolutely. And I'm a, as you know, a staunch 'Bradvocate', having had you from, from Bradford as well. It's fascinating. I think it certainly some of the ways in which knowledge is structured within the academy, that community development kind of brackets, global south and community development kind of brackets rest of our country end up in slightly different areas of the forest. But I, I like you having worked in community development and, and gender and place. In some ways it disrupts some of those binaries doesn't it, that that that were kept apart I think by knowledge being structured in slightly different ways. So in some ways it's a it's a sort of reintegration job all the time of taking what you know from one context to another.

But that's definitely been one of the things that I've always really appreciated about to, conversations with you, is that, it isn't always where you pick something up the same places where you put it down, you know,

**Kersten England:**

Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah, yeah. And I've had multiple experience in my life, which I have used purposefully when I've been in the leadership of place type role. And, and also, you know, we were lucky, of course, you went to Bradford University and, you know this, had the first peace studies department in the world, right? And and that, you know, that is internationally kind of engaged, connected, its educated, many of the politicians of the kind of the global South, actually. Or policymakers in the global South. But but because I was in Bradford initially in the 90s and early 2000, we had a connection with peace studies and so we, you know, we created an interdisciplinary project called the program for a Peaceful City, which allowed practitioners and academics in Bradford to come together to discuss some of the, as you describe, intractable issues.

And of course, that was a period of very difficult community relations. We had a number of riots. We were, you know, the subject of kind of intense focus from central government around our

work on cohesion and being able to get alongside academics in the peace studies department to collaborate on some of those issues and draw international perspectives was phenomenally helpful.

And I guess I already had a real openness to it because of my previous experience. But we went on to purpose that collaboration, fund things to look at. Water management in the Bradford district when we'd had floods because of a great hydrologists university, and we had a commission of inquiry on water management, and the weatherman from the local radio station ended up fronting it. And championing it. It was a really good experience for me of how you can bring the civic and the university, the Academy together to work properly on the issues of place.

**Nicola Headlam:**

In a sense, it's kind of it's natural to you, Kersten, but it's not natural to some people, I guess. And a lot of the work that LPIPs and the Hub have been engaged in is partly about codifying and bringing forward practice like this, which, as we know, can be done from within local government, can be done from within universities, but isn't always given the sort of profile that maybe it deserves.

These are examples I think we've spoken previously about when the Macpherson inquiry did its hearings, and again as an undergraduate student, it was completely natural to me to trot down from the university to the town hall to piece together the kind of high politics of a government government inquiry with the kind of lived experience of of people,

**Kersten England:**

Of people in place. Yeah.

**Nicola Headlam:**

And I feel like these are lessons that we that again, my, my own passion, as you know, it feels like there needs to be a sort of handbook, almost. This is how you do it. This is how to again, you you need to mobilise it from across across different sectors. But also if you are truly in service of place, the those binaries just just is non-existent really. They just don't they don't help you.

**Kisten England:**

No. I mean, if you are a leader of place and one of your core responsibilities, I think is to understand the DNA of place, of the asset base of place and bring it together in the service of the kind of the the prosperity and wellbeing of the place now and for the future.

I mean, that's a lot of words. My cat jumped on the floor. Sorry, comedy moment. So, and I never been a great respecter of boundaries. You know, I do. I absolutely respect the frameworks we have to work in. I understand the different incentive structures and governance range and all of that. But actually, you know, I've always felt part of our purpose was to create alliances across institutions, yeah, And to as, as far as is possible, disregard hierarchy and kind of institutional

boundary, you know, and, you know, as I've often said to colleagues at first, ask permission after or proceed until apprehended, as long as you're not going to break the law.

Right? I mean, I drew the line at that, but let's push the boundaries of what we don't know. I mean, you you have been known to apartheid. Well, that is true. I mean, you know, I know I mean, yeah, that is also true. I grew up understanding that the legislative framework some people live within is entirely unjust. You know, that's the other early lesson.

So but, it would be far be it for me to say to people, break the law, but we're in an interesting moment on that one aren't we.

**Nicola Headlam:**

We know I go into a lot of trouble advocating the slashing of the seats on the Elizabeth line for northern taxpayers on the basis of the. [Inaudible]

**Kersten England:**

I mean, I would just note in parentheses I was always a legal observer when I went to Greenham Common, because I knew I had to get to Zimbabwe to do my PhD, and it would be great if I had been arrested. So, yeah, but I was participating in some of that way back in the early 80s. But also, in all seriousness, an understanding sort of the positionality vis justice and economic justice.

Certainly, that that does a merger of being radically engaged and with deep work on place. Yeah. No, absolutely. I look, I've been very lucky because both the places in which I was chief exec had universities that in different ways have played a very significant part in supporting some of the agenda as a place. So when I was in Europe and of course, Europe has got the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, but also Kate Pickett had done the spirit work on the spirit level.

I mean, much debated, but I actually think there's some real kind of sense in, in the work of Richard and Kate around in income inequity. Yeah, as opposed to sheer deprivation. And when we created a fairness commission, the then Archbishop of York, Joseph Rowntree, and Kate and Richard both all sat on that fairness commission alongside businesses. Nestle as it was, the, the council. And you know, we became a living wage city and we started to look at issues of economic justice within a place that, you know, is widely seen as very affluent but has actually pockets of intense deprivation.

And that distance produces particular challenges that we needed to address. And we just we ran it through all of our policymaking. I was very lucky to have that to draw upon, you know, and then obviously when I went to Bradford, I've obviously I've already referenced, program for a peaceful city. But the born in Bradford project had been up and running.

I was actually coincidentally involved in the early 2000 on a commission on infant mortality in Bradford, which led then to the birth of born in Bradford. These kids are now turning 18, but that is a longitudinal cohort study which is producing phenomenal insights that are having impact at place level and now also informed by bringing communities, peer researchers together to look at things like neighbourhood design, air quality, physical activity, access to good, affordable,

fresh food, and has ultimately that initial investment has drawn in about 120 million pounds of additional programmatic funding to make interventions in place.

So and I guess I've I've been very privileged and lucky to have access to those assets. But I suppose it's one thing to say to anybody in a place literally, think about the assets you have in your place, the networks you have, where you, you know, you reach further than your grasp. Think about that.

**Nicola Headlam:**

That's such a good point. And I think certainly the mid-nineties, there is so much about your network capacity being actually more important than your sort of statutory functions, in a sense. And I do think I mean, certainly in terms of the way that I've always worked, a few trusted allies who might be across sectors, their career moves, that their lives move them around the the essentially, if you've had a good experience working together in different contexts to kind of get the band back together kind of under different headings is always really helpful.

**Kersten England:**

It's also very helpful. I agree. I mean, I absolutely think, you know, networking is a fundamental skill. The challenge then is to start to wire it more systematically into the governance strategy and policy, make a place so that it survives changes of leadership within institutions that becomes a way of working. And I think that's part of what the LPIPs you know, if they're really successful could lead to.

Yeah. So having the Academy present in the governance structures, the partnership governance structures have place in the subsidiary strategy and policy development, making. Do you know what I mean, in collaborator space, has been also incredibly important, and also co-investment in the infrastructure that sustains some of the work on data, evidence, analysis, do you see what I mean? Which is really part of the underpinnings, Yeah.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Well, it seems like we're in the right room. So so as you've described, this has been a long career full of insight and kind of interesting reflections. So when did you first engage with the LPIP process? You've mentioned its use in terms of anchoring. So when did you first come across?

**Kersten England:**

Okay. So there's a little bit of a pre-history to this because during the pandemic I was by then chairing the Yorkshire and Humber Chief Executive Group in local government and a very good colleague of mine vice chancellor, was chairing the Yorkshire Universities Network.

And we actually through the pandemic, many places grew closer to the universities because all bets are off. We weren't doing normal stuff where we were just trying to take our places safely through. And that included how do you keep students safe and learning? But on a broader

about how do you recover the economy? So lots of interesting, connections, either were built on or were fired up afresh, during the pandemic.

And we had a conversation about the fact that Yorkshire has 12 HEIs, you know, a number of them Russell Group. Producing world class research and evidence. Others are more vocationally focused but actually do really interesting research around economic growth and sectoral growth, I would say. And were we harnessing the kind of power of that collectively? So actually what that resulted in was a memorandum of understanding between Yorkshire universities and Yorkshire and Humber councils, and I'd say we we started to lay the foundations for what has become LPIP.

But that is better than I do have a thing about in trying to integrate the civic universities work alongside the innovation, you know, and policy, engage research work. Because, as you know, our MoU was around shared advocacy and collaboration around issues that, you know, kind of whether it was student visas at the time or whether it was transport needs, but also widening participation.

Universities, anchor institutions, you know, the usual stuff as well as research capability. So we laid that down, which resulted. And this is in part, I think, why our LPIP bid was successful. We then secured money from Research England, as you probably know, to create a policy, engaged, policy engagement and research network, which put policy fellows into all universities to build stronger connecting bridges between. And whether that that then resulted in the development of areas of research interest by places or whether it was more responsive, kind of one of pieces where we've the that program enabled support to the development of local growth plans and combined authorities in emerging, you know, as critical friends are doing focus pieces of work, working on things like poverty truth commissions in York. Working on programs around women entrepreneurs or other areas, and childcare system just to take a few examples. And I think what that started to do was create a continuous dialogue between. Yeah, well, both chief executives and vice chancellors, but beneath that, between those people responsible for policy and strategy within local and combined authorities and also pro-vice chancellors and academic researchers in particular disciplines, and taking it into the social sciences. I think there's been more of this policy engaged work between the health service and academics, because, the research infrastructure in the health system has been sustained, it's, you know, well, let's look at where the big research monies go. They do go to breakthrough discoveries around drugs, therapeutic treatments, acute and chronic. Much less has gone upstream. And so we started to bring new disciplines into play. Who'd had less experience perversely, really, in engaging with the civic sphere. But it's fair to say local government has been stripped bare, and that has included the policy and strategy functions and data functions have been stripped bare.

So it's also a real opportunity to start to create between us a capability that can be deployed in place. So when the opportunity came up to apply for one of the LPIP awards, it felt like a natural progression. We'd got a collaboration agreement with now built a bit of an infrastructure. This was an opportunity to work on particular thematic areas. I've always described x` the first investment was to create an infrastructure. The second one gives us money to do work on regional inequalities, social, economic and environmental well-being, yeah. Of course it was through the last administration. So they were using the levelling up language, which largely disappeared. We'd also say inclusive growth, foundational economy, however you want to describe it, not a lot of which is is happening at the moment in, in national policy terms.

May we come back to that? So so we took that kind of track record, if you like. And some examples of how smallish. And I don't mean that the money from LPIP is small but smallish investments overall has a gearing effect on mainstream allocation of resource and policy. Yeah. To create real change. Yeah. And that's, I think a compelling story that, research in and of itself is not going to change a but of its research married to kind of rewiring how you think about how you make an intervention in place and the policy approach to it, you can achieve real scale differences as well, particularly, I would say Born in Bradford. Bradford has shown over 18 years whether it is around, you know, air quality or physical activity or, you know, access to fresh food.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Just sort of pre-history to the actual LPIP showing up. So Yorkshire University itself was emerging out of almost informal networking, but out of necessity. Yeah. Absolutely. That's right. Y-PERN itself was the Research England piece and that was a systematising a bit of that. Yeah. The LPIP is one of the programs that is that sits within Y-PERN. Yeah. In order to try to sort of you know, and it has its specific areas of foci. So could you explain a little bit more then about the Yorkshire LPIP and its actual areas of focus?

**Kersten England:**

I can yeah. And of course, as you know there are four and you're going to cover all four and they all have quite different contexts. But the other three, it's fair to say, work on the devolved administrations with and I say this relatively stable. I mean, you can't say that, but Northern Ireland particularly, but much more settled arrangements and proximity to their devolved administrations. Yep. We know..

**Nicola Headlam:**

This is this has been the sort of surprise thing that we found that yeah, within the LPIP itself is that and we can speak for millions of hours about this. You know, the devolution arrangements outside of England are relatively mature now. It was the first Blair Brown term. Yeah. Innovations. You know, the Senedd is reaching a seventh general election next year, which was highly contested. But the processes through which the universities can kind of match with the nations of the UK seems to be, you know, a big success.

You know, my own work has always been about subnational economic development. Yes, England, which I'm currently describing as a bin fire. So the notion that at the Yorkshire scale, though, there are institutions that can map relatively easily, that the hope then is that within a wider kind of English kind of disaster when it comes to capacity, as you've described within local government.

Also, the one thing that we haven't mentioned, neither was central government commissioning any research, you know, so the whole notion that, you know, early in my career what MHCLG, as you know. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Wanted to know that that, that that contract research chunks of the university that were more engaged with policy alive for a longer time in the same period as local government was being starved out.

There wasn't a lot of, policy engaged research been commissioned by central government either. Yeah. In the Yorkshire context, the the LPIPs sits within those, we would say the spaces of opportunity, hopeful spaces. Yeah. They're not they're not tethered in the same way to statute or to.

**Kersten England:**

Absolutely not. No. Exactly. And for some, you know, the concept of Yorkshire as a region is contested in of itself and its boundaries and its geographies.

And, you know, the history is bound up with that. Nonetheless. You know, there is an understanding across Yorkshire that we have legitimate and shared concerns. Yeah, that actually we are a great demonstrator because we've got highly, you know, densely occupied urban areas. We've got sparsely settled rural areas, upland areas, we've got coastal areas. We have utility and natural infrastructure, which is completely interconnected and related.

And we have a brand. And so therefore we're we're great as demonstrator. And you know, I'm of course we're the size of Scotland. She says it it behooves me to say population base of Scotland. It's not the geography right. The geographical size. And also we reflect all kind of political administrations. So if you want to test that, how you make something work and different contexts.

Yeah. So and we have 12 HEIs, all of which have something to bring to the party, which is, I think, a hefty asset base in terms of the academy. That said, as you just pointed out, we're working in a shifting pattern of multi-level governance, right, which we're having to grapple with at a time of precarity in both the academic sector and local government.

So all of that is part of the piece. I think that makes even more the case for collaboration. and are are LPIP has a number of areas of focus. I'll just run through those very quickly and a bit of what we've been doing in each. So the first one I think really exciting is that whole thing about data democratising access to and use of data.

Yeah. Now particularly partnering the moment of kind of, you know, you know, swimming in data but not in analysis. Yeah. And swimming in disinformation and misinformation and questions about evidence and the veracity of evidence, yeah. And expertism actually. So I think quite important is to put at the disposal of communities, businesses, civic authorities. Firstly, sophisticated data correlated datasets.

Yeah. Which can be interrogated and used for multiple purposes. Yeah. To actually start to craft policy and strategy interventions, strategy priorities and policy interventions. And so we've created something called the Yorkshire engagement portal, which people can go in and have a look at. We'll put the web link, you can maybe find and put the web link because I can't remember. Yeah.

And have a play with it because it's something that was commissioned by local authorities. So it's responding to that need and something that's already garnered real interest nationally from some of the research councils to think about, you know, what might this have scalability. Might we be able to use this as a framework for looking at regional and national data?

Yeah. And so that's that's great. And you know, it's in its first iteration. So I think that's the other thing I would say is yeah. So take a look at that. The second area I would talk about is the whole

thing around a just transition to net zero. Now of course, you know, you mentioned share the information.

We launched the JUST Institute with the University of Manchester. We're not the only people work in the space. And it's important, I think, not to try and claim uniqueness. However, Yorkshire does have the biggest climate commission, which is a quadruple helix kind of collaboration actually between public, private, voluntary and community faith sector trade unions all coming together. It's been sustained by Yorkshire universities and local authorities since its inception, and doing fascinating work through YPIP funding around retrofit, bringing, you know, both citizens juries into play, looking at the kind of from the perspective of residents, users because the whole, you know, the market is not working, but also bringing together, planning, producing real practical frameworks for retrofit that allow planners, heritage officers, people advising and retrofit people working in the market. The private sector around retrofit and those, you know, people living in pre 1919 terraces to start to wrestle, you know, because at the rate we're going we're not getting very far on retrofit. Let's be really honest. But also projects looking. And I think this is the point at issues of the moment like the requirement to produce nature recovery strategies across all places.

Yeah. How can we can we build those actually with the views and voices of community and business and looking at land and water use management proactively, rather than being the domain of the experts, having a co-produced, collaborative approach that doing some fascinating work around economic development and sphagnum moss on the moors. I mean, it's an and you know, our LPIP is wide ranging, let's just put it that way.

But it is plugging into issues of the moment, policy and and programmatic priorities of the moment and bringing all voices into play alongside really good, structured evidence, rigorous thinking, but valuing the contributions of others as well. That which is. And so what you're describing is to seems like a kind, the sort of how, how scholarship ought to work.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Do you have any reflections on how I mean, what's fabulous about the, the LPIP is that you're able to tool somebody up with the research question and with the partnerships for the data and, you know, yes, it's the flexibility. Do do the academics talk to you about how why it is that they felt constrained, but about not working in this way in their normal lives.

**Kersten England:**

So we're on a journey, right? Aren't we. And I you know, I that's not been without its challenges. Right. So we've lost some academics along the way because actually their positions have, been made redundant. Yeah. We have to grapple with the fact that the career structures in universities don't incentivise this work. Yeah. You know, and I think that's, a big issue.

And we've wrestled at times with language othering. Yeah. If I was to put it that way and parity of esteem and, and that's not one way. That's just to say that, you know, sometimes people think academics are ivory tower academics out of touch with reality that use overly complicated language. Yeah, which is inaccessible and exclusionary that some, you know, academics who speak about people reverentially with lived experience.

But it's a way also of marginalising. Do you know what I mean? And so we've we have we have wrestled with all of those things. Yeah. How secure people are in their career. Yeah. How much they can step outside of their discipline. So it's not all that helpful to start talking about being a heterodox economist when you're working with a community panel looking at inclusive growth. Do you know what I mean?

Yeah. So we we've wrestled with, yeah, the the institutional cultures, some of the disciplinary cultures, some of the security people have the incentives that they they have. And similarly, we've wrestled with some of the kind of perceptions and stereotypes that exist of academics. Yeah. So yeah, and that's a continuous journey, isn't it? You know what I mean? And and I don't...

**Nicola Headlam:**

I'm always advocating that people understand that academic precarity can mean that good people who never get over the hump. In some ways, it all the things that we're describing, you know, but to me is career suicide, because getting to the heart of a discipline in publishing like mad mad has been how how people have secured themselves. Exactly. And I think that there's enormous potential for working in this way that the we're describing in having a transforming a culture and transforming place. But it can be it can be difficult and it can be lonely.

**Kersten England:**

It can be difficult and lonely. Absolutely. And you have to build your allies. And yet you have to protect your well-being. Because I also I know a lot of very good academics who are completely on board, but they're very strung out they're working all hours.

You know, because they're committed to this. But it's sometimes at the cost, as you say, of their career development or their well-being. And that's just that's not a great place to be. And some of the bigger institutions have more, you know, they have more policy support fund monies that they can align. They have bigger infrastructures that absorb some of the overhead costs.

But some of the some universities are really at the margins of viability. And that makes it exceptionally tough. So I mean, just on the YPIP. Because of course, I've described part of what we're doing. So so I'll briefly just say we're doing a heap of work around the the inclusion and sustainability of the cultural sector. A much debated at the moment, one of the most more marginal kind of, sectors in the economy, but certainly features in government thinking, certainly features in combined authority, thinking and of course, take it off to to Bradford being City of Culture this year.

But it's a it's a kind of it's an area where the kind of rhetoric and policy development is wide of how do you actually provide decent pathways to participation in the cultural sector? Yeah.

**Nicola Headlam:**

And and just to be clear, you another of your hats is that, you know, the chair of the BD 25, Year Of Culture in Bradford. Yeah.

**Kersten England:**

But we're not evaluating that as such. We're just saying, look, it's a case study of a place that's decided that the cultural sector is key. Not the only sector, but it's it's an important priority in the journey to prosperity. Yeah. So what are the conditions and and trying then to feed it. Well, feeding into one creative north the combined authority's local growth plans.

Some combined authorities I think are going to take the creative sector as they LPIF one of their LPIF priorities. So can we make one of my concerns is that bridge between work and the foundational economy, and what appears to be emerging as the preoccupations of LPIF funding the Local Innovation Partnership Fund because they, at least on face value, look as though they're quite distinct and disconnected.

And I don't think you can tackle regional inequality unless you continue to look at the kind of whole ecosystem for growth. And that means looking at foundational economy issues, which, to be fair, are YPIP is much more grounded in those than what would appear to be the kind of priorities of the LPIF. If I would say.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Then I guess that's a that's a weakness and a strength, because, you know, being able to neatly segue into a delivery kind of model would suggest be exactly the same as the old, you know, money, you know, industrial strategy being top down, but local growth plans being bottom up.

And that's there's a missing sort of middle level in terms of energising. Absolutely. And I think for me to be seen as much more of a continuation of sort of industrial strategy type funding rather than all the things that we're describing. And it is frustrating because as it is kind of coming in at the same time as the LPIF is kind of explaining the difference between the sort of approaches, it does fall to projects, and that is quite difficult. It is difficult for anyone to understand kind of why.

**Kersten England:**

Yeah. And there's a hearts and mind job to do with combined authorities, isn't there around as you know, even as weak as a subnational settlement is, you know, those monies that they have discretion over the gain share monies, the headroom that they have to actually make investments around foundational economy.

Yeah. Is really important. And and if the work we're doing through YPIP can play a part in that, that I think will be a result in and of itself. I mean, just to finish off one that I do think one of the more unique features of YPIP by comparison with the others and not a competition, because I think we're learning from each of the ways we're all doing, undertaking our work. Is that we have, a 30 strong community panel drawn from across Yorkshire of people from all backgrounds, lived experience, demographic.

Yeah. Who are working alongside us in the governance structure, informing the work programs, providing some support and, you know, and wider contributions, which is really illuminating. But yeah, I'm learning a lot from that in and of itself. But one of the key things we've done as a result

is to invest in 22 community led research projects right across the region, which and I think, you know, there some of our research is almost like academic initiated at best.

What we're doing is co-producing the research focus and methodologies with system actors. Not to use too much jargon here, but anyway. But then the community led research is actually initiated by community organisations, and we're wrapping academic support around. And we're going to learn what the strengths and weaknesses are of each approach to. So I think that will be interesting in itself.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Yeah and in a sense, I guess it would be about then blending and blurring the edges. So something doesn't feel like a community project and something doesn't feel like...

**Kersten England:**

yeah, yeah. No. So we're creating a whole I mean, certainly I'm leading on the work, but we're going to have a whole team approach of about 40 people coming together, some as system actors, some as community activists, some are academics, some are businesses work around the cultural sector.

So that and some of them will be delivering the community led research. Some will be, but it's developing that parity of esteem that sharing between the synergies. Yeah. Which is going to be important.

**Nicola Headlam:**

It's absolutely brilliant. So tell me so so let let's imagine then, I mean, as you've said, Yorkshire is the same size as Scotland. Imagine you had the 70 billion. It looks like Scotland has on paper. For economic affairs I mean is there anyone, anyone working north of the border would shoot me if I have a generous settlement? But I've been doing some work just recently on, you know, that that is essentially the the identifiable spend north of the border. Yeah, yeah. What do you think is the potential for the power of place work reaching maturity, becoming fully embedded?

Imagine you had that kind of budget. What do you think would you could change as a result? And what would the size of that prize be in the Yorkshire context?

**Kersten England:**

Wowser! Well, those are really big questions. I mean, I think at the moment I'm partly focused on ensuring we deliver as, as we've committed to. Yeah. But within. No, no, but within that with Y-PERN colleagues and even UPEN colleagues at University Policy Engagement Network and who have some, just getting up to speed with all this as a kind of person who hasn't worked in university for a long time, all these different acronyms. But anyway, there is some national funding to look at that University policy engagement and, you know, research and policy engagement.

We're building the case for a sustained infrastructure that enables that collaboration between the Academy and the civic sphere, you know, and bringing together business and community around some of the big challenges for Yorkshire and brokering the best academic support into place. Yeah, because it doesn't always reside in the particular place. Yeah. Where, you know, actually we'll go beyond the borders of Yorkshire if necessary, but I think that actually would be the biggest prize from the success of YPIP if there's sustained investment and support.

You know, and we are, you know, we are creeping towards a commitment from both the higher education sector and civic sector to fund a core. So you'll get something that was there, a policy. Scotland. I mean, there's certainly international examples where there are.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Yeah. Policy Scotland is is feeds the executive and was based at the University of Glasgow. And as you describe and has some institutional heft.

**Kersten England:**

Yeah exactly. Institutional heft has a place at the governance structures such as they offer Yorkshire, bearing in mind the voluntary. Yeah. But there is a kind of Yorkshire and Humber leaders group, Yorkshire Humber Vice-Chancellors group, they you know and they are working on shared priorities and agendas. Yeah. And having capacity and capability to support places, whether that local, subregional or regional.

Yeah. To, to kind of both craft policy interventions or run campaigns and provide advocacy into the national. Yeah. I think that that would be the big prize. I mean, my hope would be that through doing that, we could build a more coherent approach to economic growth that seeks to deliver prosperity that is more, more equitable, because actually, I think ultimately that cost less to the public purse.

Yeah. And that's the big prize. Is that what we see across all parts, just about all parts of Yorkshire, is failure demand, right. That is neither use nor element to national government or our places or the ability of people to live flourishing lives. And that's a bit grandiose, isn't it? But that's what that's what we're trying to get at this kind of enduring capacity and capability with heft, which can support the effectiveness of kind of leadership at regional and subregional and local level.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Gosh, is that all? Kersten?

**Kersten England:**

Well, I it's a that's a life's journey, isn't it? Let's face it. So let's you know so so that's why I said at the moment I want YPIP to live up to all its promises. Yeah. For us to learn from the things that go really well, that could be scaled or replicated, but also to learn from what didn't go as well.

Because that's absolutely right. Yeah. And then to seek a legacy, which wires the way of working in for the future.

**Nicola Headlam:**

That's brilliant. Thank you very much.

So I guess so we spoke we've spoken about a lot of, things that you've worked on over your career that have got elements of this within them, such as Born in Bradford. And we've talked about how to distill some of the lessons from the LPIP. Do you have any, good international lessons that you think are working well in multi in the multi-level way that we can import or steal?

**Kersten England:**

Yeah, I mean well and I would like to learn more about them right. Yes. Okay. Do you know what I mean. No, no. And it's one of the things that I do want to look more I mean I'm aware of models in well increasingly in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Scandinavia, even Italy, in places, you know, places where actually in, you know, there are legislative arrangements which incentivise, you know, because I do think this is in part about shifting the way universities are regulated, what they're inspected on meaningfully, what they're assessed on how their money flows, the incentives for career academies.

I do think it is in part dependent on actually monies, being allocated by local and subregional authorities that understand the importance of evidence analysis, policy development, you know, so, you know, which of course they do. But the money has just withered and withered and withered, you know, capabilities have withered.

**Nicola Headlam:**

But you're absolutely right now I certainly and I mean the other thing that slightly unsatisfying is that in general, as we've been just talking about for the whole conversation, where there are better federal relationships or better two tier relationships, then you've got much more to hang, you know, so, so like a lot of the examples in the States will be universities of various stripes, but they dock very neatly with either the mayoralty.

**Kersten England:**

Right.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Federal, you know, the actual places that they are.

**Kersten England:**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Like Carnegie Mellon, which is often discussed, which, you know, Robin Hamilton done a lot of work on, which was incredibly civic oriented. It has a place at the table, a permanent place at the table, within a level that we don't necessarily have.

**Kersten England:**

And then, of course, what's then, what's significant about all of that? More meaningful devolution. I mean, thus to this point in the United States, not to dwell on what's happening now, the kind of federal government has always had a level of autonomy and the ability to invest that's, you know, kind of not dependent on the national administration, is it? Yeah. And we still haven't seen that delivery in England in the way that we've had.

**Nicola Headlam:**

My great mentor Ellen Harding. No country has ever become federal by mistake.

**Kersten England:**

Oh yeah. Yeah. No.

**Nicola Headlam:**

I think I think again, without wishing to dwell too much on the problem of England, we are, you know, it is in this sphere that England, there's so much capacity to animate the the higher education resources of England in the pursuit of a kind of English set of questions.

**Kersten England:**

Yeah.

**Nicola Headlam:**

I just think that...

**Kersten England:**

I think, yeah. And sadly, I think then I would say administrations in England have become less outward facing almost as a result of the devolution to the four nations. So I certainly in other

arenas, consider, well what they're doing in Scotland? What they're doing well? Because the policy environment has shifted quite significantly.

You know, as someone who goes up there in Scotland lots because of still having family and parents, parents there, you know, I'm always struck by some of the moves that have been made around economic investment, around migration, around child poverty. You know, you just have to look at that kind of whole landscape. And I'm not the comment whether it's better or worse, it's just more determined on certain agendas, isn't it?

**Nicola Headlam:**

And I think that's right. And I mean, even, you know, in the House of Commons Library, when the initial first move, the devolution in the mid 90s, you know, and, and there was some discussion of parliamentary scrutiny of then what was different within the, the different nations of the UK. Ultimately, that fell over because it was kind of why would why would that happen?

Because you don't have a feedback mechanism back into Parliament. You don't actually have legislation in general. It's supposed to be an arrow that goes out. But actually what's happening now? You've got multi-speed policies, doing multiple different experiments in multiple different areas. There is nowhere to to for that to bend round again into learnings for other parts of the UK.

**Kersten England:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Nicola Headlam:**

So, so in your own sense it sounds like a, a huge project on in terms of LPIP, etc.. But what are you working on next? You know, with these lessons and with this knowledge?

**Kisten England:**

Well, I think I might have spoken about that already, which is that, you know, I am really keen that what we secure as a legacy is a sustained capacity and capability.

Yeah. To, to deliver great policy, engage research. Right. That makes a difference. That can be scaled and replicated. Definitely something I'm working on. I of course I'm working on lots of different fronts. So because I, you know, sharing Bradford City of Culture because I'm Chair of the Young Foundation, I'm also a commissioner on the National Preparedness Commission and on the National Literacy Trust.

So we've got some big stuff on in those arenas as well. This is me personally, and I'm speaking Nic, which I hope is, is relevant.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Knowledge is embodied. So that's why we don't just read the website out.

**Kersten England:**

You know? Yeah, yeah, yeah. So actually, the national strategy just landed a commitment from the government to put a library into every primary school by the end of the parliament. Huge!

That's huge actually, as a, as a, as a move. And we're working hard just to be part of delivering that. And also a national year of reading. And because my mother was a writer. Yeah, that's something I feel pretty passionate about. The access to literacy and the kind of love of reading and all of that. So I am working away, championing that.

And I'm also for as most of my career, I've worked on community resilience and emergency management, the National Preparedness Commission. I mean, to be serious for a minute, there's we are, I think, as a nation less prepared than many nations for the precarity of our day-to-day life, of course we had the pandemic that I don't think we've we've learned, you know, or embedded many of the lessons from that.

And we're in a very precarious world, which is characterised by, of course, misinformation, disinformation, which begs the question about evidence and experts and all the rest of it. Geopolitical conflict, environmental crisis. And so, you know, I'm thinking quite a lot. And with my Young Foundation hat on about community resilience and the fact that across the world, the global south, but also Australia, New Zealand, America, which are hit by extreme weather events regularly, or other places hit by geopolitical uncertainty.

How much, more developed there is a framework that supports communities to play their part and become resilient. Right. And and take, you know. What we use to call civil contingencies. Well, it is civil contingencies. But you know, people still get laughed at when they say you should have a battery operated or a wind up radio. You should have some batteries for your torch, you should have some, you know, basic foodstuffs in. And because you think you can, you know, that, war is imminent. But but actually it's not ridiculous.

**Nicola Headlam:**

There's a lot of brittleness built into. And that we've talked about precarity. You talked about foundational economy. And again, I guess in some in somehow in quite a lot of households.

**Kersten England:**

Yeah.

**Nicola Headlam:**

They don't roll deep in terms of, you know, if and when the worst would happen.

**Kersten England:**

Well, and rebuilding community infrastructure, mutuals and reciprocity. People knowing and watching out for each other might sound complete disconnect from all stuff from YPIP, but I think it's pretty fundamental given what's happening right now in our country in terms of disconnection, division, and part of that is actually about reinvesting in the community, networks and infrastructure that actually kind of carry a place in a time of crisis.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Absolutely.

So just and again, this is specific to you yourself. So the way that we can what it we kind of conceptualising it the on the on the higher education side you've got brokerage so knowledge brokerage. Yeah. And on the sort of decision making side you've got place leadership. And my think is it's almost like it's a Lego brick.

So your brokers need somewhere to to Lego brick together with good place leaders. So you've described obviously your operating environment of Yorkshire. So being so real specifics, can you think of people that you've worked with and it can be really any time who've demonstrated those qualities of good brokerage and can you think? I mean, of course it would be wonderful if they that neatly Lego brick done to really good place leaders.

But you know one thing at a time. So good brokers, good place leaders, please.

**Kersten England:**

Okay. Well, and I would just say something though, about the kind of regional infrastructure. So what we are doing, I'd like to get to work where it's knowledge knowledge and policy co-production. Don't mean that doesn't mean then that doesn't mean to enter a decision-taking arena.

But I also think it's worth exploring the concept of decision-making and decision-taking. Oh, yeah. You know, I mean, I just think processes and we, we have recreated the Policy Officers Network for Yorkshire. Right. So try and provide a kind of, you know, a framing for that profession which is not well supported in local government and bring alongside academics who are really interested in the process of policy formation and so on.

So just to say that. Yeah. I have worked with some some of those people and I will I'll talk about one who is a real operator, entrepreneur, whatever you call, networker, but kind of like has created momentum, which is sustained. Is it me? It is you? Well you know, you are definitely one of those kinds of people that actually that, you know, you probably know John Wright, who is the director, Born in Bradford.

Right. So, you know, at some point along the journey, got himself the title of Director of Research for Bradford District. Right. He has the many of the politicians on speed dial. He's got some of them sitting on this kind of research project governance. Yeah. He's he has his team wired into all aspects of the way that the place operates, whether it is the, you know, the Health and Wellbeing Board with the Economic Development Partnership, whether it's the kind of, sport, physical activity or even the kind of city of culture, some of his team have been supporting us to look at culture, the arts and teenage health and wellbeing and things like that.

And he is well, he's a very charismatic kind of individual who presents incredibly well, who creates momentum, is built community. He's built community, and with peer and community research, you know, with children as active participants in the research, he's built evidence which has shifted national policy. So he's got a very compelling story. And but it's not just about him.

He's built the capacity and capabilities beneath. But you can put him anywhere in front of any audience, and he has credibility. And, you know, we wouldn't have had an air quality, an air policy action zone charging clean Air zone in Bradford without the evidence that he and his team produced about the impact on asthma and children COPD in later life, admissions to A&E, the cost to the Treasury, which unlock 65 million from central government in the end. Do you see what I mean? So there's a very good example. I've worked for lots of great place leaders, actually.

**Nicola Headlam:**

And you are incredibly well networked across all the places that good place leaders go. So, I would be I would expect nothing less. But can you think of one or a number to that? You could shout out?

**Kersten England:**

So it is this, isn't it? So I've worked with some great individuals. I mean, I think the, you know, if you talk about political leaders or we talk about political leaders. Yeah. Right now I think Tom Hunt's doing and Chris Hewson, they're doing fabulous jobs. Well, I'm Steve Holliday I mean, I actually think the South Yorkshire crew have really got their act together haven't they.

Do you know what I mean? And the kind of it's been brilliant to see Sheffield emerge from some of its travails into a much clearer, you know, get its hotspur back, as I call it, you know, I mean it's mojo. Get up and start talking about who it is, what's potential is and collaboration. Of course, married with a, a great chief exec who is also a place very wedded to place leadership.

But you know, Steve Houghton has been plugging away at this stuff for you know you know Barnsley leader. He's chair the Yorkshire. He's very wedded to regionalism. He's very a he works across all political boundaries. He's always engaged with academics actually and from the coalfields a lot. I'm judgment was called the industrial communities and I think.

Yeah, yeah. I mean, you know, the leader I work for in Bradford has worn out every pair of shoes he's ever had, kind of working across all government departments and with all parts of society to try and bring together a coalition of the willing for Bradford. Immense respect from, I mean, it's hard. I mean, look, it's hard not to sit up when Andy Burnham talks, right?

Even with all the other stuff that goes around it. Yeah, but he's he's brought a level of dynamism, imagination, innovation, radical thinking, which you may like or may not like. It may sit with government policy or not. It may step on the toes of local authorities. But but I think it's, it's, positively disruptive on the whole.

**Nicola Headlam:**

As a Greater Manchester Council taxpayer. We're definitely very supportive of Andy.

**Kersten England:**

Well, and you see some of what's in you know for all that I will challenge, you know previous colleagues about looking at the income deprivation levels. You know and whereas the real focus and movement all those things. But yeah so so yes I can think of lots actually and lots of great chief execs that I've worked with who are innately wedded to making the most of the place they're in, and not just institutional management.

**Nicola Headlam:**

You know, that, to be honest, that's exactly. Well, that's what frustrates me is if and when local government is misunderstood as a series of institutions and levers and all the rest of it, because instinctively, people that can work with the warp and weft of their place, particularly.

**Kersten England:**

It's the warp and the weft is absolutely right. Yeah.

**Nicola Headlam:**

And but that's, that's the people that I'm drawn to and the people whose careers I follow and the people that I surround myself with are those people that are able to do it in that way. And my what? My sort of confusion is how there is the disconnect. And again, you know, the civil service is very different as you well, you mentioned that you when you were working nationally on neighbourhood renewal, the need to sort of unpick everything and start again with a blank piece of paper every 3 or 4 years.

**Kersten England:**

Oh, listen it's crazy. I mean, this is not say everything under New Labour was brilliant, but I've often times come back to thinking about Talk Place, Local Strategic Partnerships, Sustainable Community Strategy, Sure Start, you know all the things. And if we had, you know sustained some of those approaches. Yeah.

**Nicola Headlam:**

But it wasn't just it wasn't just as, you know, it wasn't just at the neighbourhood level because that was then plugged into the regional PSA target, and there was a target tree.

Yeah, there was a sort of sense that was made. And I think it was I thinking actually, when you were talking about the National Literacy Trust piece, how open and welcoming this government would be of an initiative like that. But how hopeless in terms of designing the full set of

institutions that would enable or ensure it, do you see what I mean, that the gang is perfectly happy it you know, in special pleading, always right side of the argument.

But somehow they are really failing to design in the know. There's no design thinking in this government as far as I can see. Even if you look at the recent, they can't they can't even design the child abuse inquiry in a way which is, you know, which is able to stick. And that is the thing that worries me the most.

**Kersten England:**

Well, you know, there's lots of reasons behind that. One is also the decline in trust of and respect for policy. The other is, of course, the the distancing of the civil service from places which has happened. You know, I work for a government office, right. I'm the director of local government for Yorkshire and the Humber. There was a middleware now put in civil service campuses in cities and places like Dorrington is great, you know, and it is beneficial in some respects. But it's not the same as creating meaningful, abiding relationships between relatively senior civil servants and places. So I would say, you know, not across government office for better or ill, there was what were called in grade five, which is relatively senior, you know, directors of education, health, etc. and we all knew each and we all knew the places and we could get alongside places and work with them in a meaningful way that just you've lost those connecting pieces.

And now what you get is people with varying levels of experience that move around a lot, that have never worked in localities, particularly if their in the policy strategy roles. And there is a kind of class generation and geographical separation. Still. Yeah, still.

**Nicola Headlam:**

That's right. And I mean in some ways and again, we will speak again, no doubt about picking over the carcass of the various regional sort of experiments over the years.

As you know, it isn't exactly that fun, but in the bit under which the so in some ways the worst of the bonfire of the quangos was the Audit Commission on the basis that, you know, local government now isn't about marking its own homework. No one's marking its homework. You don't have you don't have accounts that are agreed for local government. The immiseration of it.

**Kersten England:**

I mean the audit function for local government. Is it, I mean, and the Audit Commission actually was able to play a twin role at times, which was developmental and supportive, as well as regulatory And it was. And now you get regulators who say, no, no, we don't do because it compromises the audit or the regulation process.

And you're like, well, where is the opportunity to wrestle with some of these big intractable issues or some of the policy approaches? I've had this with regulators often, CQC, where some

of the way it's structured is just completely perverse and counter intuitive to delivering what's right for people in place.

**Nicola Headlam:**

And this is exactly it. Is that pro place policy is pro human policy.

**Kersten England:**

Yeah.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Something's happened to our machine where it is. When there were machine, it's sort of machine input in a machine output out.

**Kersten England:**

Yeah.

**Nicola Headlam:**

But being able to and, you know, another way of looking at it is it's a crisis of the meta governance piece. So the governing of government is appalling and has been both centrally and locally here really for a really long time.

And again, you know, we're not it's not that it was the Elysium fields of New Labour, but there was a kind of clear narrative about actually what the different scales were going to do and how it was all going to pull together into a national mission. Yeah, that.

**Kersten England:**

Yeah, I'm not seeing the infrastructure for delivery of the missions in a coherent way at the moment. I think it's safe to say.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Right. I'm going to let you, Kersten England, have a wave of my place-based innovation magic wand. Be careful with it. It can grant a wish. You have absolute power to do one of these things. But you must use your powers to make a tangible change to a specific place. Your will change will be specific, measurable, actionable, recordable and transferable.

Smart magic is hard to get hold of at the moment and is subject to a 20% reducing multi-year budget settlement. You can have a 10 million pound project fund. But let's be clear. Let's be

real. Since we're talking about the scale of Scotland into Yorkshire, you can have a 70 billion pound project fund. You can have a half an hour with the central cabinet and a slide deck.

Or in your case, I think it would be a pointy, pointy stick. You can have editorial control of the front page of a tabloid. You can have a clause to insert into a bill. Although I am prepared to allow you a whole bill if it's if you need it. You allowed a message that goes viral on TikTok. You're allowed anyone as an advocate for the for your work, or you're allowed the answer to something that's always bothered you.

As you can see, you know, this is partly just to sort of give it give it a bit of a shake and see what you think could really make a change in the context that you work in. So here you are. One wish.

**Kersten England:**

Go on. And you know, well, this is the hardest thing one wish because there's so many different things that I would well, things I'd want to see in legislation. Right. And things that I would want. And, I'm not going to go to the 70 billion.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Today?

**Kersten England:**

No. Not today. No. And, because you're granting it whatever I think I might say, going to talk about the, community resilience framework. Right. And actually, I want to look at a kind of regional and national framework for community resilience, which provides an infrastructure for mutualism and reciprocity between communities, provides access to the kind of training development you get around civil contingencies that provides some of the infrastructure at local level for places, organisations in place that can be there and also can leverage investment from insurance companies, Community Lottery Fund and others to provide basic kit for communities and households around community resilience. There you are. That's what I would promote.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Gosh! Let's call it a bill. In that case. But we have to will the means as well. So the bill is the Community Resilience Act.

**Kersten England:**

Yes, it would be an amendment maybe to the community. The Civil Contingencies Act, which really underplays I mean, it loads the submissions to it.

I have, I have done presentations to cabinet that have resulted in monies from time to time. But there you go. It would be it would be, it could be this the Community Resilience Act or the Civil Contingencies Act amended to give real meaning to community resilience.

**Nicola Headlam:**

Well, there you are. Now I want my magic wand back. I don't want you waving it around. Thank you so much for joining us. We set out to mine insights from experts. That's you. Real world case studies. I had millions of them. I'm not sure, but practical tips and career advice. I think it was more, acknowledging precarity for a start and to spotlight solutions as well as to wave the place-based innovation magic wand.

01:03:47:01 - 01:03:59:05

Unknown

And we have. Thank you for joining us, Kersten England.